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Exploring the influences on classroom-based contact via shared education in Northern Ireland

Rebecca Loader

Abstract

Initiatives in intercultural education have frequently involved the promotion of contact between members of different groups as a means of improving intergroup relations. Experience from Northern Ireland suggests, however, that such schemes have often been organised and delivered in such a way that opportunities for sustained, high-quality contact are limited. This paper considers processes of contact in one relatively recent initiative, 'shared education', which involves collaboration between separate schools to deliver classes to Catholic and Protestant pupils in mixed groups. Employing qualitative methods of observation and interviewing to capture participants' experiences of contact, the research explores the influences on the quality and frequency of cross-group interaction in the shared class. With findings highlighting the subject and pedagogy, teacher's approach and classroom arrangement as key factors, the study offers suggestions for policy and practice to enhance opportunities for contact and relationship-building in mixed classes.

Key words: social cohesion, intercultural education, classroom practice, intergroup relations

Introduction

Within the field of intercultural education, the provision of opportunities for members of different ethnic groups to meet, interact and share perspectives has been one of the most common strategies for improving intergroup relations. Some activities of this type are explicitly founded on an understanding of the contact hypothesis, which posits that contact between members of different groups should help to enhance relations between them (Allport, 1954); other such activities have no formal theoretical underpinning but reflect similar assumptions. In view of the extensive evidence supporting the relationship between contact and reduced prejudice (see Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006), such approaches would seem to be well founded. In the context of Northern Ireland, however, there has been some concern regarding the implementation of these initiatives, with critics suggesting that they provide

insufficient opportunity for high-quality contact between students from different backgrounds (Richardson, 2011).

One explanation for the limited effectiveness of contact programmes in Northern Ireland has been that teachers lack a sophisticated understanding of the principles of contact theory (Gallagher, 2005; Richardson, 2011). If this is the case, it is also true that researchers working in this area have offered teachers little in the way of guidance. Although studies from the United States have provided some direction in the form of cooperative learning approaches that appear to reduce prejudice in mixed classes (Slavin, 1991; Slavin and Cooper, 1999), there has been no recent research in Northern Ireland that explores the factors that foster (or, indeed, impede) high-quality interaction in mixed educational settings. This reflects a limitation of contact research more generally, which has tended to focus on the outcomes of contact, measured in terms of changes in attitude and intended behaviour towards the other group, and paid little attention to the *process* of interaction (Connolly, 2000; Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005). With a limited understanding of what people do during contact itself (Harwood, 2010), and how this is influenced by the setting and context, researchers have been able to make few suggestions as to how contact might be organised to ensure it offers the ‘friendship potential’ recommended in the literature (Pettigrew, 1998).

This article aims to address this limitation through a study of contact processes in shared education programmes in Northern Ireland. A relatively recent initiative, shared education involves collaboration between schools of different denominations to deliver subject teaching to pupils in mixed classes. Specifically, the research explores the relationship between the contact situation (in this case, the shared class) and the encounters that occur within it, examining how features of the setting can facilitate or hinder interaction and the development of cross-group friendships. Departing from the quantitative methods that have characterised much (outcomes-focused) research on contact, this study employs qualitative interviews and classroom observations to capture more effectively the experience of contact among pupils in shared classes. Highlighting the influence of features such as the classroom layout, subject and class size on contact, the study seeks to provide some guidance for teachers and programme staff on encouraging and enhancing interaction via shared education.

Education in Northern Ireland

The education system in Northern Ireland reflects the ethnoreligious division that continues to exist in the region, with more than 90 per cent of pupils attending schools that are either predominantly Protestant (known as ‘controlled schools’) or predominantly Catholic (‘maintained schools’) (Department of Education, 2015a). Against a backdrop of conflict, the existence of separate schools has been contentious, with critics claiming that they foster suspicion and hostility between pupils from different religious backgrounds (Grayling, 2005; Pavett, 2011). While a small body of research has lent support to this argument (Darby *et al.*, 1977; Murray, 1985; Hughes, 2011), proponents of faith-based education continue to reject such assertions, arguing that the curriculum and values of faith schools contribute to social cohesion (Catholic Bishops of Northern Ireland, 2001; Council for Catholic Maintained Schools, 2007). There has been greater consensus, however, regarding the central role of schools in addressing division in Northern Ireland, and this has been reflected over the past forty years in a series of initiatives from educationalists, policymakers and others that aim to increase tolerance and understanding between the two communities (Gallagher, 2004, 2005).

A key element within this work has been the promotion of contact between Catholic and Protestant pupils, principally via contact schemes and integrated schools. Cross-community contact schemes developed from the 1970s and brought together pupils from controlled and maintained schools for joint projects, activities or school trips. Although well-intentioned, these schemes were criticised for their short-term nature and their failure to provide opportunities for effective contact (O’Connor, Hartop and McCully, 2002; Richardson, 2011). Too often, critics argued, such initiatives involved pupils “following the same activity in parallel groups, with their separateness relatively intact” (Richardson, 2011, p.334). Seeking to promote more substantive mixing, the first integrated school was founded in 1981 and the sector currently numbers 62 schools, which educate approximately 7 per cent of the region’s pupils (Department of Education, 2015a, 2015b). Research has indicated that attendance at an integrated school is associated with more positive attitudes and behaviours towards the other group, a finding that has been explained by pupils’ more frequent experiences of contact at these schools (Stringer *et al.*, 2009; Hughes *et al.*, 2013). While integrated education thus appears beneficial for community relations, a combination of factors, including parental choice, residential segregation, and the interests of political and religious groups, makes more substantial growth in the sector unlikely in the near future.

Against this background, a new initiative, termed ‘shared education’ was introduced in Northern Ireland in 2007. Within the model of shared education, schools from different sectors (controlled, maintained and integrated) form collaborative partnerships to deliver joint classes and activities for pupils in mixed groups. Wearing the uniform of their own school, students travel between the schools to attend lessons, usually on a weekly basis. As an intermediary between contact schemes and integrated schools, shared education seeks to provide sustained opportunities for contact between Catholic and Protestant pupils while permitting schools to retain their distinctive identity and ethos. In addition, the programme aims to contribute to financial savings and, via inter-school collaboration, to help schools improve educational outcomes and meet new minimum curriculum requirements (Gallagher *et al.*, 2010; Connolly, Purvis and O’Grady, 2013). The emphasis in shared education on the joint provision of curriculum subjects reflects the learning from previous community relations activities in schools: often on the periphery of the curriculum, these tended to be marginalised as schools concentrated on meeting performance targets set by the Department of Education (Donnelly and Hughes, 2006; Donnelly and Gallagher, 2008).

To date, shared education has been delivered principally through three programmes funded by philanthropic organisations and operating across primary or secondary phases of education.¹ This article focuses on one of these, the Sharing Education Programme (SEP), which was coordinated by Queen’s University between 2007 and 2013, and involved more than 15,000 pupils across 150 schools (Knox, 2013). Research into SEP has identified a number of positive outcomes of shared education: compared with students who attend schools that are not involved in the programme, pupils at participating schools typically report a higher number of friends from the other group, a reduction in anxiety regarding cross-community interaction, and more positive intergroup attitudes (Hughes *et al.*, 2012). Students at SEP schools also demonstrate more positive action tendencies – i.e. a desire to help, support, and learn more about the other community – and report greater willingness to discuss cultural and religious difference (Hughes *et al.* 2010; Hughes *et al.*, 2012). These positive findings align with those of the larger body of research on intergroup contact, which has been influential in the development of shared education.

¹ From September 2015, shared education is being delivered through the Shared Education Signature Project coordinated by the Department of Education.

Contact theory

What became known as ‘the contact hypothesis’ is most commonly attributed to Gordon Allport (1954), whose seminal work, ‘The Nature of Prejudice’, proposed that direct contact between members of two or more ethnic groups could effect a reduction in prejudice when four facilitating conditions were in place: equal status among participants; common goals during the encounter; co-operation between group members; and institutional support for contact. In the decades following the publication of Allport’s work, most of the research activity in this area focused on testing the basic premise of the contact hypothesis. This culminated in the publication in 2006 of a meta-analysis of 515 such studies from 38 countries, which provided strong empirical support for a negative association between intergroup contact and prejudice (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2006). Notably, this analysis found that, while the effects of contact were stronger in the presence of Allport’s four facilitating conditions, contact remained effective in their absence. In line with Pettigrew’s (1998) emphasis on ‘friendship potential’ within contact situations, Pettigrew and Tropp’s analysis also identified friendship as the optimal form of contact for improving intergroup attitudes.

With the contact-prejudice relationship thus well established, researchers’ attention has turned in recent years from whether contact improves attitudes to *when* and *how* it does so. Regarding the question of *when* contact is effective, studies have reported a greater impact when group membership is salient during the encounter and individuals in contact appear to be ‘typical’ of their group (Ensari and Miller, 2002; Voci and Hewstone, 2003). Stronger contact effects have also been observed among members of majority groups (compared with minority groups) and among those who initially held more prejudiced attitudes (Tropp and Pettigrew, 2005; Hodson, Costello and MacInnes, 2013). In terms of *how* contact reduces prejudice, researchers have identified affective change as particularly important, with intergroup anxiety and empathy emerging as prominent mediators of the effect of contact on attitudes (Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008; Swart *et al.*, 2011). Also significant is the process of self-disclosure – the sharing of personal information about oneself – which has been found to promote greater trust in, and empathy for, members of different ethnic and religious groups (Turner, Hewstone and Voci, 2007; Turner and Feddes, 2011). To facilitate these processes, researchers have advocated contact that is experienced as pleasant and harmonious, typically encouraging either interpersonal responses (Brewer and Miller, 1984) or common identification (Gaertner *et al.* 1996). However, recent commentary has suggested that, while such contact can help to reduce anxiety and encourage more positive affective attitudes, it

may struggle to challenge negative stereotypes or address issues of inequality and discrimination (Dixon *et al.*, 2012; Donnelly, 2008, 2012; Maoz, 2011).

While contact theory has been described as “one of the most long-lived and successful ideas in the history of social psychology” (Brown, 2010, p.244), it has nevertheless received criticism on a number of methodological and theoretical points, two of which are relevant to this paper. The first is that researchers have paid insufficient attention to the “unfolding interactions” that occur “between groups in ordinary situations” (Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005, p.703). This is a reflection of methodological conventions within studies of contact, which typically adopt experimental methods in highly controlled laboratory settings or employ survey-based approaches that focus on attitudinal outcomes and summarise the nature of contact in a few variables relating to frequency and quality. As a result, contact research has been limited in what it can reveal about the developing *process* of contact, including how people act during intergroup encounters (Connolly, 2000; Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005; Harwood, 2010). One of the consequences of this is a paucity of information about the kinds of situation and activity that can promote and enhance interaction - a significant limitation, particularly for those looking to develop initiatives that offer ‘friendship potential’.

A second, related criticism has addressed researchers’ neglect of individuals’ views and experiences of contact and the contextual influences that shape these (Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005). This, again, is partly a function of the dominant methods in this area, which most commonly require participants to select from a list of pre-coded answers, offering limited scope for them to advance their own interpretations. This failure to develop a full appreciation of lay perspectives on contact is likely to be to the detriment of contact interventions: without an appreciation of the perceptions and experiences of those involved, the response of researchers and practitioners is less likely to be effective. To address this limitation, Dixon and colleagues (2005, p.704) advocate the use of approaches that are more sensitive to participants’ interpretations, highlighting the particular value of qualitative methods.

The current research

In light of the above criticism, this research explores the unfolding process of contact within shared education, focusing in particular on the relationship between the contact situation (the

shared class) and pupils' responses to others. Unlike the majority of research in this area, the current study is concerned not with the impact of contact, but with the influences *on* contact within the classroom setting. The research employs a qualitative approach to capture the experiences and perspectives of participants and identify the factors that they consider important in shaping interaction in the shared class.

The settings for this research are two shared education partnerships located in the rural towns of 'Whitecliff' and 'Bellevue'. These partnerships provide appropriate settings in which to explore interaction and integration as most participants are relatively new to mixed classes: of the 60 pupils interviewed for this study, 45 had attended shared classes for nine months or less. Both the Whitecliff and Bellevue partnerships comprise two post-primary schools, one Catholic and one Protestant, which work together to deliver courses leading to qualifications at 16 and 18. In Whitecliff, a history of partnership between the two schools is reflected in the extent of collaboration, with approximately a third of subjects at Key Stage 4 (ages 14-16) and all post-16 provision delivered jointly. In Bellevue, in which shared education is comparatively new, two subjects were delivered via collaboration in the year of the research: a two-year vocational (BTEC) engineering course and a one-year personal effectiveness course, both offered to students post-16. The two Bellevue schools had also chosen to fund, separately, a joint health and social care course, which was delivered at a local further education college.

Data were collected principally through semi-structured group interviews with pupils participating in shared education. Sixty pupils (28 in Bellevue and 32 in Whitecliff), aged between 14 and 18 (in years 11 to 13 in the Northern Ireland system), took part in small groups comprising between two and four pupils. Participants were selected to reflect the mix of subjects delivered through shared education and the year groups involved. To ensure that pupils could speak as freely as possible, each interview group comprised participants from the same school. Interviews took place in an unused classroom during the school day and lasted approximately 40 minutes on average. Opening with some general 'ice-breaking' conversation about pupils' subject choices and interests, the interviews progressed through topics including their understanding of the aim and purpose of shared education; their previous contact with the other group; the dynamics and interactions within the shared class; their relationships with students from the other school and the factors that had helped or hindered relationship-building; and their opinions of shared education following their

participation, including suggestions for improvements to the programme. To augment the pupil data, individual interviews were also undertaken with seven class teachers (three in Bellevue and four in Whitecliff), who specialised in subjects including geography, PE, personal effectiveness, and engineering. All had taught shared classes for at least two years and were asked during the interview about their personal involvement in shared education and their perceptions of the pupil experience.

Alongside the interviews, a series of observations of shared classes were conducted in both partnerships. These proved a valuable complement to the interviews, sensitising the researcher to incidents and behaviours that could be explored during the interviews and allowing her to witness first-hand some of the features that pupils had discussed. Six observations (three per school) were undertaken in Whitecliff, across a mix of classes including history, physical education, and health and social care, and four observations in Bellevue, involving one engineering and one personal effectiveness class in each school. During each observation, the researcher sat at the back of the classroom and recorded details of the physical environment, pupils' seating positions, the content of the lesson, and the pupil-pupil and teacher-pupil interaction that occurred.

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, while handwritten observational notes were expanded and transferred to a laptop computer at the end of the school day. Both interview and observational data were analysed according to the six-step thematic approach outlined by Braun and Clarke (2006), with the assistance of the qualitative analysis programme MaxQDA. This involved the close reading and systematic notation of interview transcripts and observational data, attaching short codes to sections of text that exhibited a particular descriptive or theoretical idea (Gibbs, 2007). Codes employed in this project included, for example, 'time together', 'closeness' and 'ice-breaking'. Once these codes had been refined and data re-coded as appropriate, the coded dataset was analysed for themes, defined by Braun and Clarke (2006, p.82) as representing "some level of *patterned* response or meaning within the data set". This entailed combining codes of a similar type or on a similar subject into thematic groups and developing these into hierarchies of main themes and sub-themes, which are reflected in the headings in the following section. Once candidate themes and their associated codes had been identified, these were reviewed in relation to the data as a whole to ensure that they appropriately reflected the meanings within it.

In the analysis discussed in the following sections, the thematic focus is principally on school- and classroom-level factors, as these are within the power of schools to change in order to enhance interaction. Further discussion of community and contextual influences can be found in other recent studies of shared education, particularly Hughes (2014) and Loader and Hughes (forthcoming).

Findings

Reflecting the research focus on the contact situation and its impact on pupils' responses, this analysis identified four key influences on the quantity and quality of contact in the classroom: the subject and pedagogy; the approach of the teacher; the size and composition of the class; and the classroom arrangement. The data in this section is organised according to these headings. The latter part of the section considers the nature of contact between pupils in the shared classes, in terms of both content and frequency. It explores how participants' interactions were shaped by the contact situation and the opportunities that it offered for conversation and collaborative working, and considers the effects of this on the relationships that pupils developed.

Influences on contact within the classroom

Subject and pedagogy

The subject that pupils were studying proved to have a significant influence on the quality and frequency of contact between them, with courses such as drama, physical education and personal effectiveness appearing particularly favourable to interaction. In contrast with more traditional academic subjects, in which pupils were usually assessed on an individual basis, these courses often required students to collaborate to complete coursework, thereby providing them with more extensive opportunities to interact, develop mutual trust, and engage in the self-disclosure endorsed in contact theory.

Nathan: *At the start, remember, Helen and Lucy and Lynn were on the other side of the room?*

Grace: *Yeah, it was kind of awkward...but then after a while everybody just came together.*

Nathan: *It's like the more performance we did, the easier it got.*

Grace: *So drama's a really good subject to do.* (Year 13, Catholic school, Whitecliff)

The way our CoPE² class works is that we are always in the same room and the five boys come down to us from Holy Saviour School and we work together. We all get on really well. We just work at CoPE and chit-chat. (Girl, year 13, Protestant school, Bellevue)

In subjects that did not entail the same interdependence, the use of group work in lessons could create similar opportunities for interaction. Although the inclusion of group activities is recommended in the Revised Northern Ireland Curriculum as a means of developing skills in working with others, observations and interviews suggested that its use varied by subject. While group tasks and discussions were incorporated within subjects such as modern languages and politics, there appeared to be fewer opportunities of this type in science and technology subjects. Students in these classes reported a greater emphasis on the transmission of knowledge from the teacher to the student: as one pupil studying engineering in Bellevue commented, “*you’re mainly listening to the teacher all the time*”, leaving little scope for pupil-to-pupil interaction.

The subject matter was, however, not the only course-related influence on opportunities for peer interaction. With shared education focusing in both partnerships on examination courses, it was perhaps not surprising to find that opportunities for interaction were limited as coursework deadlines and exams loomed. As the year progressed and teachers sought to move increasingly quickly through the syllabus, it was evident that they considered interaction between pupils as inimical to effective learning. Instead, silent individual working was encouraged, as the excerpts below demonstrate, and the lessons featured a high level of teacher-focused activity.

The teacher reiterated several times the need for students to be quiet and work individually on their studies. She threatened the class with coming back in on the following Bank Holiday Monday – St Patrick’s Day – and emphasised that they would have no more class time in which to do this work. (Observation notes from a year 13 class, Whitecliff)

² Certificate of Personal Effectiveness

Interviewer: *Do you get an opportunity to talk much in the lessons?*

Peter: *No!* [Laughs]

Kevin: *You're just told to be quiet, that's it.*

Peter: *Yeah, you have to do the work.*

Kevin: *It's pure work until you leave, like.* (Boys, year 13, Catholic school, Bellevue)

The approach of the teacher

As the preceding point suggests, the teacher's influence on cross-group contact in shared classes was significant. It was evident from discussions with pupils that the teacher's willingness to provide and facilitate opportunities for interaction was crucial in helping students to build relationships, particularly during the early stages of shared education when there was the potential for separate school groups to emerge in the class. Several pupils spoke of feelings of awkwardness about initiating interaction at this stage, with comments such as "*you don't really know how to start talking to them, so you just don't talk to them*" and "*you wouldn't really know what to talk about...so it's hard to make conversation*" being typical of this group. Where there was little intervention from teachers to address this, in the form of 'ice-breaking' activities or similar, non-contact could become the norm in the shared class.

All teacher interviewees accepted that encouraging contact was part of their role, although some were more interested in this than others, and none reported specific training for this purpose. While interviewees with backgrounds in English, modern languages and history stated that they could draw on existing skills and teaching experience to build interaction into the lesson, teachers of science-based subjects appeared less engaged in this task and emphasised during the interview that their main priority was to cover the course content and "*make sure they [the pupils] get the results*". In spite of their varying interest, each of the teachers spoke of attempting to foster interaction by, for example, dedicating part of a lesson to 'social time', facilitating group conversations, and using seating plans to promote integration. Three interviewees also spoke also of their attempts to create a supportive environment for contact by treating pupils from both schools equally and encouraging a relaxed atmosphere in the class.

Discussions with teachers yielded examples of practice that was sensitive to pupils' anxieties about initiating interaction and was designed to support their early encounters within the

class. Two examples in particular were notable. In Whitecliff, a teacher of history and politics spoke of spending the first week of term on induction activities, including “*name games and a bit about their background, a bit about their identity*”, in which he also participated. These activities were designed to encourage conversation and reduce anxiety around religious/cultural difference, and the teacher reported that they had had a positive impact on classroom dynamics. Furthermore, the teacher discussed using the diversity within the class for pedagogical purposes by encouraging pupils to explore contrasting political perspectives during lessons on the Northern Ireland political system. In Bellevue, a personal effectiveness teacher described how she tried to encourage contact by acting as an intermediary, drawing pupils from the two schools into conversation before retreating as their discussion progressed. This approach was witnessed by the researcher during a lesson observation, from which it was apparent that, by sharing information about her own hobbies, interests and family background, and asking relevant questions of participants, the teacher was able to model and encourage self-disclosure among pupils.

While the fostering of conversations addressing political divergences in Whitecliff occurred within the particular context of the history and politics classroom, it is noteworthy - in the context of a reconciliation programme - that questions of cultural, political and religious difference were rarely otherwise introduced by teachers, either in conversation or through the lesson content. Some teachers attributed this to a lack of opportunity to incorporate such topics into the curriculum, particularly where they taught STEM-related subjects; other teachers seemed to take their cue from pupils, engaging with these issues if they were raised by students, but not introducing them directly. Having received no formal preparation for the task of facilitating interaction, teachers also reported no training to equip them to address controversial matters in the classroom. As a result, the norms of avoidance that surrounded these topics were largely unchallenged by teaching staff and shared classes offered few opportunities to engage in dialogue and enhance intercultural understanding.

The size and composition of the class

Emerging as further influences on interaction were the size and composition of the shared class. Smaller classes, which were more common post-16, tended to foster more extensive interaction, due to the greater exposure of each individual and the more intimate atmosphere that a small class permitted. As a result, pupils attending shared classes with few or no others from their school reported more positive experiences in these than in larger classes. In

smaller classes, too, pupils were less likely to be surrounded by friends from their own school and in such cases sought contact with pupils from the other school to avoid feeling isolated.

Interviewer: *So what do you think makes the difference [in the level of interaction] between your classes?*

Kevin: *There's a lot less people in their class.*

Karen: *Our class is a lot smaller than theirs.*

Interviewer: *Right, you think that makes a difference?*

Kevin: *Yeah.* (Year 13, Catholic school, Bellevue)

In the larger classes that were typical at Key Stage 4, pupils were more frequently joined by friends and acquaintances from their own school. As interviewees described, the company of these peers could prove reassuring during the early stages of shared education, especially for pupils attending classes at the other school. As the course progressed, however, this could hinder interaction: surrounded by existing friends, students in larger classes lacked the impetus of those in smaller groups to form cross-group friendships. Even when participants were willing to initiate conversation, social conventions could make it difficult to do so. One group of girls, for example, spoke of an unwillingness to flout the norms of teenage friendship which disapproved of approaches by 'outsiders' that might disrupt existing friendship groups.

You sort of don't want to break up their friendship groups, cos, like, I know in our RE [Religious Education], they're paired, and the pairs are friends, or a wee small group of them are friends, so you kind of feel awkward, trying to go into their wee group, you know. (Girl, year 13, Protestant school, Whitecliff)

In addition to class size and ethno-religious grouping, gender influenced patterns of interaction. Discussions with pupils confirmed what was noted during the classroom observations: that when same-sex friends from their school were unavailable, pupils preferred to sit and converse with pupils of the same sex from the other school than with coreligionists of the opposite sex. As a result, as Michelle indicates below, the major divide in these classes was along the lines of gender rather than religious background.

Michelle: *There's four girls and two boys [from the other school]. From our school, there's me and my friend – she's a girl – and then a boy, so at the start he kind of felt a bit left out with staying with me and my friend, but now he's, like, become really good friends with the two boys in our class, so he'd sit with them and all, and chat away with them.*

Interviewer: *So the girls and the boys keep to themselves a bit, do they?*

Michelle: *Yeah!* (Girl, year 13, Catholic school, Bellevue)

This preference for the company of others of the same sex, irrespective of background, suggests that gender could 'cross-cut' religious background to promote interaction between students, at least in smaller classes where friends of the same sex and school were less likely to be present. Gender characteristics were also discussed by teachers and pupils as influences on the contact experienced by boys and girls in the shared class: whereas boys were thought to be “quieter” and “more awkward”, girls were described as “better at mixing” and “more friendly”. While these descriptions appear to reflect common gender stereotypes, they may also point to differences in relational behaviours between teenage boys and girls that have implications for contact among this age group.

The classroom arrangement

The fourth major influence on interaction was the physical environment, particularly the arrangement of furniture (and thus of students) within the space, which could either encourage or impede tendencies towards separation. This influence emerged during classroom observations, from which it was apparent that, particularly in large classes, participants frequently sat in separate, school-based clusters. Pupils confirmed during the interviews that this was a common pattern, reflecting their desire in the early stages of shared education to sit with existing friends. Once chosen, these seating arrangements remained in place for the duration of the school year and, whether intentionally or not, served to maintain boundaries and regulate the frequency of interaction between pupils.

Melissa: *And then in RE, it's like St Brendan's and then--*

Abigail: *One row. Middle row, separate.*

Melissa: *One row, and then the other one, and then there's us.*

Abigail: *So there's one row in between us.*

Emily: *I think it's just cos in the first week, you wanted to stick to the people you knew, and then you just had to stick with them seats.*

Abigail: *Those just became your seats.* (Year 13, Protestant school, Whitecliff)

Tendencies such as these towards separation were exacerbated by the layout of classroom furniture in ways that inhibited contact. As the quote above describes, the traditional arrangement of desks and chairs in forward-facing rows could result in the clustering of pupils by school, thus impeding interaction. Creating small 'islands' of tables around the room could have a similar effect: in one class, where there were four spaces at each table, pupils sat around these in school groups. In contrast, arranging desks in a horseshoe shape or, where numbers permitted, seating pupils around one or two large tables appeared to be effective in countering separation, as this allowed participants to sit with existing friends yet still interact with others. A comment from one pupil was illustrative of this: "*we're all in the middle of the room, facing each other, so you just kind of have conversations among each other*".

As it was sometimes unfeasible to change the layout of individual classrooms, especially when teachers were moving between schools, an alternative approach was to encourage 'mixing' by altering pupils' seating positions. Interviewees in Bellevue reported that teachers had attempted this in two classes, with mixed results. In an engineering class, a strategy of seating pupils alternately by school appeared to have been unsuccessful: participants reported that they had rarely interacted with their new neighbours and had eventually moved to sit with existing friends from their own school. In a health and social care class, which was taught at the local FE college to pupils from both schools, the same strategy had been more effective: pupils remained 'mixed' for the rest of the year and spoke positively of the experience. Although gender norms and characteristics may be relevant to this difference, given that both classes were single sex (engineering comprising only boys and health and social care only girls), the level of interaction encouraged by the teachers also appeared important. While health and social care students described taking part in complementary "*ice-breakers*", which made their introductions "*a lot easier*", these appeared not to have occurred in the engineering class. Without this help to foster cross-group contact, pupils struggled to

initiate interaction and eventually retreated to the comfort and familiarity of existing friendship groups.

The nature and content of interaction

The effect of these influences was discernible in pupils' descriptions of the interaction and relationships that developed in shared classes. Where they reported that the classroom situation was favourable to contact, they also spoke of more frequent and high-quality interaction. Of the 10 students (four in Whitecliff and six in Bellevue) who reported forming cross-group friendships, for example, nine were studying subjects such as drama, physical education and personal effectiveness, in which interaction was encouraged, and all were members of smaller, post-16 classes. These environments offered opportunities particularly for informal and interpersonal (or 'social') contact, involving the exchange of details about the previous weekend's activities and forthcoming arrangements; discussions of hobbies, interests and career plans; and, particularly among boys, the sharing of information and opinions about recent sports events. This form of contact enabled pupils to identify common interests, share personal information and develop the type of close relationship that shared education seeks to promote. Although pupils largely avoided allusions to intergroup difference in order to preserve harmony and amicability, this more intimate contact also provided the few occasions where cultural differences, particularly relating to sport³, were discussed.

In contrast, where pupils attended shared classes that presented few contact opportunities, they spoke of relationships that had barely developed after a year or more. Among the 12 pupils (six from each partnership) reporting that students from the other school remained largely strangers, eight described shared classes characterised by teacher-led learning, large size (including at post-16 level) and classroom segregation. Furthermore, seven indicated difficulties initiating interaction that had not been addressed through the teacher's intervention, resulting in patterns of non-contact that, once entrenched, persisted throughout the year.

³ In Northern Ireland, particular sports have traditionally been associated with one of the two communities and this is reflected in rates of participation. While hockey and rugby have been identified with the Protestant/unionist community, Gaelic sports such as hurling, camogie and Gaelic football have strong Catholic/nationalist associations.

The remaining 38 students described ‘acquaintance’-type relationships consistent with the sporadic, casual interaction that characterised much classroom contact. While some among this number described engaging in informal social contact in these classes, others spoke of interaction that focused largely on the content of the lesson and the tasks that had been set. While such task-based interaction involved little exchange of personal information, and thus appeared to hold limited ‘friendship potential’, it nevertheless offered certain benefits. By providing a focus for conversation, particularly for those nervous about initiating cross-group interaction, it could help to reduce concerns about future contact: six pupils reported, for example, feeling less “*cautious*” or “*scared*” of future intergroup encounters as a result of these experiences. This type of interaction could also lay the foundations for further contact, including interaction beyond the classroom. Illustrating this, two groups of girls in Bellevue described how pupils from the two schools communicated via text message or social media to discuss and assist one another with homework.

While informal social contact appeared more directly conducive to friendship-building than task-based contact, opportunities for the former were comparatively infrequent, a point emphasised by pupils’ comparisons between the contact they experienced during induction sessions and that which occurred in the classroom. Induction days, which took place at the start of the school year, involved structured activities and informal social events to introduce students to one another. Pupils commented on these in half the interviews, speaking favourably of the opportunities they offered to “*talk normally*” and “*get to know each other*” in a “*more relaxed*” setting than the classroom. Such comments point to a drawback of the curriculum-focused nature of shared education: even where opportunities for interaction are maximised, the potential for social contact in the learning environment, with its particular norms and pressures, may remain limited.

Discussion

The model of shared education envisages that improvements in intergroup relations will occur via the development of cross-group friendships between pupils participating in shared classes. The fulfilment of this expectation depends on the existence of opportunities for pupils to interact, yet little research has considered the extent of such opportunities within shared classes. Studies of previous contact initiatives have suggested, however, that these have often been poorly implemented, indicating the need for greater guidance for

practitioners. To improve our understanding of intergroup interaction via shared education, and the influences that shape it, this study employed a qualitative approach to study processes of contact in the shared class. From classroom observations and interviews with pupils and teachers, the research has identified four key features of the shared class which, either alone or in combination, could influence the quantity and nature of contact: the subject and pedagogy; the approach of the teacher; the size and composition of the group; and the arrangement of the classroom. In the discussion that follows, the findings from this study are divided into two groups – those relating to teaching and pedagogy, and those relating to classroom ecology – and explored in relation to existing bodies of literature on intergroup relations and classroom practice.

Teaching and pedagogy

Findings from this study highlight the influence of the subject, pedagogy and teaching style on interaction in the shared class, in the first case indicating that subjects such as drama and music, in which collaboration is a key element, may be particularly amenable to interaction. This echoes the insights of Hughes and colleagues (Hughes *et al.*, 2010; Hughes, 2014), who similarly found that subjects such as drama and dance offered frequent opportunities for pupils to share information about themselves (a process known as ‘self-disclosure’) and develop empathy with others, thereby promoting closer relationships in line with the model of contact theory (Turner, Hewstone and Voci, 2007; Pettigrew and Tropp, 2008). This study has also suggested that, in subjects in which collaborative working is not so central, opportunities for interaction could be created through the use of small group activities – a finding supported by research on cooperative group work, both where improving intergroup relations was an explicit goal of cooperation (Slavin, 1991; Slavin and Cooper, 1999) and where it was not (Baines *et al.*, 2009; Blatchford *et al.*, 2006; Galton, Hargreaves and Pell, 2009).

Despite the potential of collaborative tasks for enhancing contact, this study found that the use of group work varied between classes. While the continued dominance of methods of direct transmission in certain subjects, particularly science and mathematics (Dow, 2006; Noyes, 2012; Pampaka *et al.*, 2012), may partly explain this, research has found that teachers’ reluctance to incorporate group activities also results from a lack of training in effective group work and from a fear of losing control over the class (Baines *et al.*, 2009; Galton, Hargreaves and Pell, 2009). These observations resonate with the findings of this

research, from which there emerged a sense that teachers considered peer interaction to impede rather than enhance learning. This view was reflected in the lack of opportunity for interaction as coursework deadlines and exams loomed, as well as in some teachers' misgivings about encouraging contact in class and the insistence that their primary role was to prepare pupils for upcoming examinations.

These findings suggest that a tension may exist within shared education between the aims of improving educational outcomes and enhancing intergroup relations, with implications for the delivery of shared classes. While shared education expects improvements in relations to arise via in-class contact and friendship development, it was clear that certain teachers saw pupil-to-pupil contact as a distraction from learning and actively discouraged it. Where this tension arose, concerns about educational outcomes took precedence, reflecting the current policy emphasis on examination results as a key measure of schools' effectiveness. (Schools' contribution to enhanced community relations is, by contrast, not assessed.) Whilst previous research has recognised this tendency for community relations activity to be deprioritised as schools focus on improving their performance against these measures (Donnelly and Gallagher, 2008; Donnelly and Hughes, 2006), it is concerning to see the same situation emerging in shared education given its explicit aim of improving both educational and social outcomes.

Where teaching methods, subject conventions and classroom norms reduce the opportunities for pupils to collaborate in the classroom, this will impede the potential for interaction and the likelihood that friendships will develop and relations improve in line with the theory that underpins shared education. This was apparent in discussions with participating pupils: those who reported more established relationships with members of the other group were almost all involved in classes that, due to the pedagogical norms of the subject and the approach of the teacher, as well as the size and arrangement of the class, permitted more extensive interaction, and particularly 'social' interaction (although more task-focused contact was nonetheless beneficial). Even where opportunities for interaction are increased, however, the classroom and curriculum-based nature of shared education means that the potential for this more informal, personal contact is likely to remain limited.

For these reason, schools might consider how they can support in-class contact with opportunities for 'sharing' outside the classroom. Joint extra-curricular activities, shared

careers sessions, and the opportunity to stay at the other school for break or lunchtime could provide, at low cost, more of the social time that appears necessary for relationship-building and was valued by pupils. Holding activity sessions similar to the induction days at additional points in the year, although entailing a small cost, would also enhance social contact while providing a structured and sympathetic means of exploring intergroup difference – something that was rarely addressed through shared education, due to the pressures of the curriculum and concerns to maintain harmony among students. Facilitating relationship-building and intergroup dialogue in an informal environment, these sessions would thus ensure that opportunities to challenge stereotypes, build trust and encourage mutual understanding are not lost (see Donnelly, 2008, 2012 and Maoz, 2011).

Classroom ecology

In addition to the subject and pedagogy, the size and composition of shared classes were identified as important influences on opportunities for contact in the classroom. Small classes appeared to permit closer interaction than large classes, while the gender make-up and the numbers of pupils from each school were also relevant. Indeed, these three factors often interacted to encourage or impede contact: to take one example, cross-group interaction along gender lines occurred more frequently in smaller classes, whereas pupils in larger classes tended to remain in groups with students of the same sex and school. Gender characteristics were also considered to be important influences on interaction, with interviewees of both sexes suggesting that girls were more sociable than boys and thus more likely to engage in interaction.

Studies from education and psychology, while not all focusing specifically on *intergroup* contact, provide support for several of the influences on interaction identified herein.

Research on class size has reported increased peer-to-peer interaction, closer peer relationships and a greater sense of community in small classes than in large ones (Blatchford *et al.*, 2001; Harfit, 2013; Harfit and Tsui, 2015). Again highlighting the influence of the teacher, these differences have been attributed in part to changes in the teaching style between classes of different sizes, with teacher-centred methods favoured in large classes as a way to maintaining control (Harfit, 2013). With respect to gender, while a considerable body of research has identified a preference for same-sex friendship across the life-course (see Mehta and Strough, 2009, for a review), it is particularly notable that the present study echoes previous research that found sex to be more influential than ethnicity in individuals' choice of

friends and acquaintances (Schofield and Sagar, 1977; Fulbeck, 2011). Studies of peer relationship processes also provide some support for interviewees' perceptions of differences between boys' and girls' relational behaviours (see Rose and Rudolf, 2006, for a review), although one should note findings from research showing that boys may be more likely than girls to engage in cross-group contact (Clack *et al.*, 2005; Schofield and Sagar, 1977).

Pupils' tendency to separate into school groups, particularly in large classes, is mirrored in recent studies of the micro-ecology of contact across educational settings, including classrooms, university seminar rooms, lecture theatres and school cafeterias (Alexander and Tredoux, 2010; Al-Ramiah *et al.*, 2015; Clack *et al.*, 2005; Koen and Durrheim, 2010; McKeown *et al.*, 2012, 2015). These studies each recorded the emergence of segregation by ethnicity or religious background at an early stage, which the authors attribute to the presence of existing friendships, students' need for comfort and security, and adherence to social norms (Alexander and Tredoux, 2010; Al-Ramiah *et al.*, 2015; McKeown *et al.*, 2012). Moreover, the longitudinal studies among these found that segregation persisted and even increased over time (Alexander and Tredoux, 2010; Koen and Durrheim, 2010; McKeown *et al.*, 2015), thus highlighting the importance of disrupting patterns of separation before they become entrenched.

To counteract tendencies towards separation within the shared class, the current study has identified two possible approaches: firstly, altering the arrangement of the classroom and, secondly, adopting seating plans to mix pupils within the space. In the first case, this study has suggested that seating pupils around one or two large tables – or, as might be more practical in a large class, in a horseshoe arrangement – may help to limit separation. Not only does this allow physically for greater contact (Blatchford *et al.*, 2003; Randeree, 2006), but it also communicates symbolically to students that interaction is encouraged within the space – something that is not the case for seating in rows and columns (Martin, 2006). With respect to mixing pupils, recent research by van den Berg and colleagues (2012) has found that reducing the distance between students in a classroom can promote higher likeability ratings, thereby indicating the potential of mixed seating arrangements (where feasible) to enhance relations. As the current study found, however, simply mixing students within the space might not by itself promote contact; rather, this approach may be more effective when combined with activities that facilitate interaction.

Conclusion

As discussed in the opening section of this article, part of the intention behind this study has been to inform practical guidance, grounded in the experiences of participants, for enhancing contact in the shared class. While this represents only one study and should not be considered definitive, the data point to a number of principles and actions that may help to promote interaction. The first is that those involved in the design and delivery of shared education should recognise that, if shared classes are to offer the ‘friendship potential’ advocated by Pettigrew (1998), they need to ensure that pupils have opportunities to interact. This requires that teachers possess both the skills and the willingness to foster contact in a learning environment, which in turn may require the provision of tailored training on topics such as effective group work, supporting peer interactions, and handling contentious issues in a mixed environment.

In tandem with pedagogical approaches to enhancing contact, those with responsibility for shared education should be cognisant, firstly, of the influence of pupil composition on classroom dynamics and, secondly, of the ways in which the classroom environment might promote or impede interaction. First, while it may not be feasible or even desirable to prescribe the size and make-up of the class, alerting teachers to these features may encourage them to consider strategies – such as splitting the class into smaller groups – that could promote interaction in large, mixed classes. Second, shared education coordinators and teaching staff should consider whether the arrangement of the classroom might unwittingly impede interaction, and, if so, how this might be addressed. Where possible, teachers might look to reposition furniture in ways that are sympathetic to contact or consider introducing mixed seating arrangements, complemented by ‘ice-breaking’ activities, to foster interaction between students from different schools.

Finally, while the classroom is the focus of this study, those with responsibility for shared education also need to consider what actions may be required outside this space to support contact within it. As discussed above, the provision of social opportunities beyond the classroom, in the form of shared extra-curricular activities and shared breaktimes, may help to assist relationship-building at the school level. Such efforts must also be supported at the policy level, however, if they are to have widespread impact. In this regard, one possible approach would be to introduce an indicator of schools’ contribution to community relations into the performance management regime, encouraging school leaders and teaching staff to

place greater emphasis on activities that promote relationship-building. Unless such a mechanism is introduced, it is likely that the social goals of shared education will remain a secondary priority.

This article concludes with an observation of relevance to those implementing and researching contact programmes. As this study has shown, any initiative that seeks to promote effective contact requires a considered approach. While contact research has long recognised this and, indeed, has been criticised in the past for defining so many conditions for positive encounters as to be impracticable (Pettigrew, 1998; Dixon, Durrheim and Tredoux, 2005), the risk is that the reverse is true ‘on the ground’ – that the need to plan and facilitate intergroup encounters may be underappreciated. This suggests a disconnection between research and practice in improving intergroup relations, and points to the need for studies that can inform practical support for those involved in intercultural education. While it is important to improve understanding of the psychological processes involved in contact, research should also be able to help practitioners create the situations that facilitate these processes – for example, identifying how programmes can be structured to reduce anxiety and promote empathy, or how activities can be organised to maintain identity salience and promote collaboration. This, in turn, will require researchers to be attentive to the context of contact, both at the socio-cultural-political level and in the micro-spaces, such as the classroom, in which interaction occurs. By identifying some of the influences on contact in the shared class and offering some practical insights to enhance interaction via shared education, the current study aims to make a contribution to this work.

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